Revised Editions of Tolkien Scholarship

Jane Chance. ***Tolkien's Art: A Mythology for England.*** Revised Edition. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001. 262p.

Jane Chance. ***The Lord of the Rings: The Mythology of Power.*** Revised Edition. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001. 162p.

Verlyn Flieger. ***Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World.*** Revised Edition. Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2002. 196p.

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Publishers and readers should ask themselves when presented with a revision of a scholarly book: why revise this book? Why not, for instance, write an entirely new book? If the book is still relevant and valuable, why revise it at all? These questions, and others, can fairly be asked of the three books discussed here. All three are close studies of the work of J.R.R. Tolkien, were originally written in the last twenty-five years, and revised in the last two years. Jane Chance's book *Tolkien's Art: A Mythology for England*, originally published in 1979, and published in revised form in 2001, is a "study to show how [Tolkien's] creative works reflect his interest in medieval English literature" (4). Chance narrows the focus of her study to the theme of kingship and its adversaries—of the heroes and the monsters. Both the hero and the monster appear in Tolkien's work at times disguised and at times revealed.

Chance uses this overarching theme of King versus Monster to guide her through the many years of Tolkien's life and the wide variety of his writings, to make her claim that Tolkien's native English literature deeply and most significantly informed his writing. This she demonstrates well enough, with detailed discussion of Tolkien's work and the traditions and works that she could directly relate by Tolkien's own words, and through analysis of similarities in the works being considered.

Certainly, in 1979, this achievement was significant. But in 2003, there is simply so much more work available now regarding this connection between English literary heritage and Tolkien's work, too voluminous even to mention representative works. Further, much of this work is based on much more of Tolkien's own work than Chance had available to her. Also, it is not the sheer volume of the more

recent scholarship, as the volume and quality that together render the revision of Chance's book (though not at all the inherent value of the work itself) less than invaluable. Chance's writing style must share the blame. She depends far too much on a simple symbolic formula for analyzing almost all aspects of Tolkien's work. The repeated resort to and occurrences of the formula nearly reduces all of Tolkien's work to allegory, and her own study to a tedious exercise in symbolic analysis. In fact, the ubiquity of the comparisons and analogies and symbolisms that Chance suggests end up detracting from her aim, which is to demonstrate the intimate role that English heroic literature played in Tolkien's creative work, because the reader begins to suspect that Chance found too many connections, and too many that were too simple and merely speculative rather than grounded in direct reference by Tolkien himself, or by philological reference.

If the value of a revision of *Tolkien's Art* is debatable, that of Chance's book *The Lord of the Rings: The Mythology of Power* is not debatable: there is no merit in this revision. *The Mythology of Power* is the more recent of the two books, but is the more irrelevant now. Chance reads *The Lord of the Rings* in terms of political power and cultural diversity, which are relevant enough categories, but her use of them is too simplistic and tedious. She never directly and satisfactorily defines "political" or "the other," and her illustrations of these are almost always simply the telling of some specifics of the plot of the story.

Other revisions are equally unquestionable, because unquestionably worthwhile. Verlyn Flieger's *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World*, is such a revision. Published originally in 1983, Flieger's work is as illuminating and enjoyable to read as it was the first time around. Her writing is clear, her chapters are short and to the point, and her subject matter is not only interesting but must still very much be a matter of considered speculation rather than simple proof.

Flieger focuses on what Tolkien himself focused on as a scholar and author: words. Her broad claim is that Tolkien's most significant impetus in writing of *The Silmarillion* was philological. Likening his writing of *The Silmarillion* to that of his article "Sigelwara Land," she suggests that "the reward for such a painstaking and (it must be admitted) obscure piece of research is the penetration into a lost attitude of mind, the participation of his own imaginative faculty with that of a people long gone.... It is a voyage to recover meaning and from that meaning to recapture the imagination and perception of those for whom the word was current" (Light 8). Her narrower claim is that this philological and imaginative effort of Tolkien's was profoundly influenced and directed by the work of Owen Barfield. Flieger introduces and outlines Barfield's work in this regard, namely his theory of the development of human consciousness and the record of that development

left in human language. She then argues this connection between Barfield and Tolkien on two points: Tolkien's explicit references to Barfield, and the consonance between *The Silmarillion* and Barfield's theory of language development.

Flieger's achievement on the second point is credible and creditable. Further, it is an achievement so far unique in Tolkien scholarship: relating Tolkien's philological speculations to his fiction. Knowing Barfield, the reader agrees with Flieger's analysis of the development of the Elvish peoples and languages through the First, Second, and Third Ages of Middle Earth, and that this development indeed illustrates Barfield's own speculations on the development of human consciousness and language in our world. Flieger's close reading of Tolkien, and her claims regarding not just the philosophical provenance of some of Tolkien's deeper intuitions about language and human consciousness, but the intrinsic interest of those intuitions and the explicit discussion and development of such intuitions in Barfield's work, lend a depth, substance, and urgency to her work.

Why urgency? Because Flieger's book gets at things that, with each passing year and each new publication of source texts, Tolkien scholars have less and less justification for missing or ignoring: the intuition regarding the nature of language that is absolutely central to Tolkien's work and at the heart of his thinking. Tracing the literary influences on his work simply does not suffice to capture this fact fully. Flieger's revised work puts this question on the table again, where it awaits a true and close study in the context of Tolkien's vast literary achievements. ❋